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AUTHOR Culbertson, Hugh M.; Somerick, Nancy
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine how people react to unnamed or veiled news sources in newspaper articles. A group of 283 persons, chosen at random from three contrasting communities, was asked to read two articles dealing with different topics, one with sources quoted by name and one with euphemisms ("a White House spokesman," "a city official") substituted for names. Respondents rated the stories on perceived level of accuracy and truthfulness and on level of reader interest and then answered questions dealing with views about attribution practice. The study revealed that, on the whole, people were suspicious of cloaked news sources viewed in the abstract. However, veiled attribution apparently does not lead to cynicism about the news media, as no differences were found between named and unnamed sources as they affected a story's overall believability. A great many respondents felt that the typical veiled news source is rather knowledgeable, that veiled attribution reflects a source's need for secrecy in most cases, and that "leaks" are, on balance, a good thing. People of higher social and educational status were highly aware of factors that might lead one to doubt the credibility of unnamed sources, but they were especially apt to see a need for news "leaks" in our society. (GW)

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# CLOAKED ATTRIBUTION—WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO NEWS READERS?

An ANPA
News Research Center Study

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By
Hugh M. Culbertson
Professor of Journalism
Ohio University
and
Nancy Somerick
Assistant Professor of Communication
Cleveland State University

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(Ed. Note: This is part two of a study conducted by Hugh M. Culbertson on veiled news sources. The first study, "Veiled News Sources—Who and What Are They," was published in ANPA News Research Bulletin No. 3, May 14, 1975. Both studies were commissioned by the News Research Center of the American Newspaper Publishers Association.)

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# Cloaked Attribution—What Does It Mean To News Readers?

By
Hugh M. Culbertson
Professor of Journalism
Ohio University
and
Nancy Somerick
Assistant Professor of Communication
Cleveland State University

The Watergate and Agnew scandals have recently focused public attention on unnamed or veiled news sources—long a concern to journalists. Press observers have argued at length on the wisdom of quoting such sources.

On the positive side, James Reston of The New York Times has labelled the newsleak a "safety valve for democracy." He said that it:

> "leaves room for honest dissenters. It is the refuge of conscience. It can be used for good or evil: disclose the murders of My Lai, the secret bombing of Cambodia, the cover-up of Watergate."[1]

On the negative side, veiled sources have sometimes proven wrong, embarrassing the newsmen involved.[2] Big-name leakers have allegedly been able to get big play for unsupported statements of intuition and opinion.[3] Readers have received little information about why a news source says what he says.[4] Also, it's alleged that leaks subvert grand juries and deprive defendants of their rights.

Despite this often heated discussion among government officials and journalists, very little research has been done on how many readers notice veiled attribution—or on how skeptical about it audiences may be.

Adams did find that, in the early 1960s, a sample of college students attached relatively high credibility to unnamed government sources.[5] However, these results may not apply to the post-Watergate population as a whole in the mid-1970s.

Recent polls have uncovered a great deal of skepticism—in some cases, cynicism—about major American institutions, including the

media.[6] This could reflect or contribute to doubts about such practices as veiled attribution.

However, Edelstein, in a West Coast study found some evidences of fairly high public respect for media coverage of Watergate.[7] It is possible that veiled sources gained credibility during the Watergate affair because they turned out to be quite accurate.

But there is also reason to suspect that few people notice. In the 1940s and 50s, the Continuing Study of Newspaper Readership and other research revealed that only about 10 to 15% of a newspaper's audience actually read a typical item.[8] Given such cursory attention to the news, it seems doubtful that a high proportion of people carefully weigh the credibility and implications of unnamed sources.

## Finding the Answer

To determine how people in general react to veiled sources, we focused on contrasting Ohio communities. Any finding which holds in these communities should apply in a great many other areas as well. (And clear differences between the areas may suggest hypotheses for later study.)

The communities were:

*Zanesville*—a relatively isolated town of about 35,000. A recent study of media use there revealed relatively little penetration by metropolitan papers. Also, Zanesville has been conservative politically for some time.[9] And it has a good deal of poverty (median income for families and unattached individuals was $7,440 in 1970, and 15% of all families fell below the census-defined poverty line).

*Shaker Heights*—a cosmopolitan, well-to-do Cleveland suburb with about 36,000 people. Movement from downtown Cleveland and elsewhere has recently made the population of this community more heterogeneous than before—14.5% were black in 1970. However, the socioeconomic status remains high (the median income of $19,928 was almost three times that of Zanesville in 1970, and only 2.8% of all families fell below the poverty line).

*Athens*—a town which, like Zanesville, sits on the edge of Appalachia in southeastern Ohio. The small sample from Athens was added to the study design because of problems of hiring interviewers in Zanesville. Median income in Athens was $9,186 in 1970, not much above Zanesville. Further, our additional Athens responses greatly resembled those of Zanesville, so the two often were analyzed as a unit.

## Conclusions

The study found that, on the whole, people do not have a very clear picture of veiled news sources. But few feel much need for clarification.

However, a great many people apparently do feel:

- That the typical veiled source is rather knowledgeable. He's often perceived as close to important people. Yet he appears to hold little power himself despite being deeply enmeshed in bureaucratic maneuvers.
- That many such news sources are not their "own persons," that they really speak for others. Of course, newsmen often imply this by using such labels as "spokesman" and "aide."
- That veiled attribution reflects a source's need for secrecy in most cases. Only about one sixth of the people sampled ascribed more cloaking to media news judgment than to source needs for keeping lids on.
- That despite the intrigue which underlies them, leaks are, on balance, a good thing.

This study provides little support for the idea that veiled attribution is adding to cynicism about the news media. In our field experiment, we found no differences between named and unnamed sources as they affected a story's overall believability. (Surprisingly, however, cloaking sometimes spiced up a story so as to make it interesting.)

Watergate did appear to make many people more aware of cloaking than before, but not necessarily more skeptical about it.

The more politically aware, well-educated, print-oriented members of our sample proved highly aware of the veiled source's need for secrecy, which could imply an ax to grind. Also, these people complained with special vigor about the newspaper's failure to provide adequate background information.

At the same time, however, the rather elite news consumer was especially apt to see a need for news leaks in our society.

## Methodology

In Shaker Heights and Zanesville, we sampled addresses from most recent city directories. Streets were chosen randomly. Then every "nth" address from a randomly chosen starting point was surveyed within a given street. Athens had no city directory. We chose the sample there in regular interval fashion from the

telephone directory. Table 1, using census data as a benchmark, indicates the three samples were representative as to education level, race and sex.[10]

TABLE 1

Comparison Of Samples Studied
With Populations As Described
In 1970 U.S. Census

| Education | Shaker Heights | Zanesville | Athens |
|---|---|---|---|
| Median Education, persons 25 years old and older, 1970 census* | 14.8 years | 11.3 years | 14.1 years |
| Median Education, present samples | 14.3 years | 11.3 years | 14.1 years |
| **Race** | | | |
| Percentage of residents who were black, 1970 census | 14.5% | 8.8% | 4.5% |
| Percentage of respondents who were black in present study | 14.4% | 8.0% | 0.0% |
| **Sex** | | | |
| Percentage of residents who were males, 1970 census | 46.7% | 45.8% | 51.7% |
| Percentage of residents who were males, present study | 51.2% | 40.2% | 60.9% |
| **Age** | | | |
| Median age of residents 18 years of age and over, 1970 census | 43.7 years | 47.6 years | 22.5 years |
| Median age of respondents, all 18 years of age and over, present study | 38.9 years | 41.2 years | 30.6 years |

*These medians are approximate. Within a given community, the median of males 25 years of age and older was multiplied by the number of such males. The same was done for females. Then the two products were summed, and the sum was divided by the total number of residents in the community.

Data collection began in mid-November 1974. Most was completed by early January 1975, all by early February. * The schedule dealt little with specifics of news breaking at this time, so the long interviewing period should not have affected results greatly. Of course, developments leading up to the Watergate-related trials of early 1975 kept the scandal—and to some extent the problem of leaks—in the news throughout this time.

Each interview took about 30 minutes. Pre-tested on a small general-population sample in Athens, the questionnaire included two basic parts.

First, we reproduced by ditto four newspaper articles 250 to 500 words long. These dealt with:

1. A dispute between neighborhood citizens in city government over alleged failure to enforce housing codes in Cincinnati.
2. Speculation about four possible candidates for the post of Veterans' Affairs Administrator.
3. The beginning of a biennial meeting of Warsaw Pact leaders. The lead stressed the arrival of top Soviet brass. The story then focused on Western diplomats' comments about the meeting's possible significance.
4. Completion of closed hearings in the House of Representatives Judiciary Committee on the Watergate cover-up. Committee special counsel John Doar was quoted as saying articles of impeachment were being prepared. Three members of the Judiciary Committee expressed varying opinions about the evidence. And White House counsel James St. Clair strongly challenged the prosecution's case.

About one half of all respondents reading a given article received a "named" version with two to five persons quoted by name. Names were real in the Cincinnati-housing and Watergate stories, fictitious in the Veterans Administration and Warsaw Pact pieces. Except for the Watergate item, the named sources quoted were unknown to most respondents.

The other half received an identical story except that euphemisms (an official in the city housing department, a White House spokesman, a high-ranking Western diplomat, etc.) were substituted for names.

Each respondent received two articles dealing with different topics—one with names and one with euphemisms.

* This period included most of a strike by the Cleveland Plain Dealer and a lockout by the Press. The Plain Dealer strike ran from Oct. 31 to Dec. 23, the Press lockout from Nov. 9 to Dec. 23. This could have affected results by increasing dependence on other media at the time of the interviewing. However, such contamination seems apt to be minor. No questions about media use or preference focused specifically on the days or weeks leading up to an interview.

It's obviously difficult, if not impossible, to state **in general** whether named sources are more or less credible than unnamed. A highly regarded Secretary of State seems bound to appear more credible when identified by name than when he escapes recognition by being labelled a "senior State Department official." But a low-credible Secretary might get the worst of such a comparison. We sought, by using mostly rather unknown sources, to compare reactions to named quotation with those to cloaking as a **practice**, disregarding the particular source names involved.

After reading an article, a respondent rated it on four seven-point semantic differential scales labelled with adjectives having opposite meanings. Two scales (accurate-inaccurate and truthful-untruthful) got at perceived accuracy. Two others (dull-exciting and interesting-uninteresting) focused on level of reader interest.

Previous studies have shown that, when people judge media content, they frequently think in terms of accuracy and interest level.[11] Also, there's evidence that the words accuracy and truthfullness get at one underlying idea, as do dullness and interest.*

Respondents rated total stories, not news sources viewed in isolation. This seemed reasonable since, given their documented tendency to read hurriedly, people doubtless often come away with global impressions of an entire story rather than careful analyses of specific story parts.

Half of all respondents got a named version first, half unnamed. Order did appear to make a difference, perhaps partly because someone reading his or her second version could compare that with the first and see differences in attribution clearly. As a result, we controlled for order (holding it constant while looking at other things) in the analysis.

After rating two articles, each respondent answered 31 questions dealing with views about attribution practice, tendencies to ignore or notice news sources and bylines, and demographics (age, education, income, etc.)

The questions permitted us to construct five indices designed to split our sample into groups which might differ in reacting to attribution practice. These indices dealt with:

*Print Orientation:* How much time did one spend reading the newspaper each day? What media did he or she depend on most as a source of news (TV, newspapers, radio, magazines or people)? What media would he or she be most reluctant to give up as a news source? And what paper or papers were

* The correlation between ratings on exciting-dull and on interesting-uninteresting was .70 on a scale from 0 to 1. The relationship between accurate-inaccurate and truthful-untruthful was .75.

read regularly? The second of these questions was drawn from Burns Roper's widely publicized studies of media credibility.[12] The third was a modified version of another Roper question. Taken as a whole, these items permitted us to assign values from 0 to 4 on print-orientation.

*Electronic-orientation:* How much time did one spend listening to TV news? And was television or radio chosen in response to the two modified-Roper questions above? Based on these items, respondents were assigned values from 0 to 3 on electronic-orientation.

*Public affairs knowledge level:* Respondents were asked to identify eight figures in the news and indicate in a phrase or two who they were. Grading was rather lenient and one point was assigned for each correct answer. As Table 2 shows, Shaker Heights residents did substantially better than those from Zanesville in identifying most personalities listed. Athens tended to fall in between.

TABLE 2

Percentage Of Respondents In The Three Communities Studied Who Correctly Identified Eight Figures In The News

| Figure | Shaker Heights (No. of respondents =125) | Zanesville (No. of respondents =112) | Athens (No. of respondents =46) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Billie Jean King | 89% | 80% | 96% |
| Charles Sandman | 67% | 12% | 24% |
| Ralph Perk | 91% | 50% | 80% |
| Anwar Sadat | 76% | 43% | 76% |
| Sylvester Del Corso* | 24% | 6% | 15% |
| Earl Butz | 67% | 52% | 72% |
| Gordon Strachan | 41% | 13% | 28% |
| Haile Selassie | 66% | 45% | 41% |

*Sylvester Del Corso was commander of the Ohio National Guard at the time of the Kent State University shootings which led to the death of four students in May 1970.

*Education* level completed.

*Political stance.* Here there were two questions. The first asked how interested one was in politics (very interested, somewhat interested or not interested at all). The second dealt with party allegiance or leaning (Democratic, Republican, other party, no party at all).

## The Public's Reaction

On the whole, respondents were suspicious of cloaked news sources viewed in the abstract. In one question, we had asked how inclined people were to believe what unidentified news sources say? In other words, did our respondents regard such sources as more believable—or less so—than sources identified by name?

In all 68% saw cloaked sources as less believable, only 14% as more believable. The vote against spokesmen, aides and their brethren was about 8-1 in Shaker Heights, 5-1 in Athens and 4-1 in Zanesville.

To pursue people's specific perception of veiled sources, we listed six widely used cloaked-attribution labels and labelling phrases—spokesmen, insider, well-placed source, aide, high-ranking official and authority. Each person interviewed first pondered the word "spokesman" before choosing any of nine modifying phrases (knows important people, has little power or authority, is devious, etc.) which seemed to describe a spokesman. This procedure was repeated for each of the five label phrases shown in Table 3.

There was little agreement in matching label phrases with modifying phrase. However, some associations implying veiled sources are considered knowledgeable and well-connected did show up fairly often:

Forty-eight percent said an authority has considerable expertise. Twenty-two percent characterized high-ranking officials in this way. And 18% said the same of well-placed sources.

Twenty-eight percent indicated an insider knows important people. Twenty-six percent said this of high-ranking officials, 18% of well-placed sources.

In other phrase choices, respondents showed some awareness that veiled sources are often involved in political or bureaucratic maneuvering. This may tie in with a fairly widespread perception that many sources are not "their own persons"—that they really speak for others.

Twenty-eight percent of the respondents said an aide has little power or authority. Twenty-six percent said the same about an insider, 23% about a well-placed source.

In a related vein, more than half (53%) viewed a spokesman as "simply a mouthpiece." Seventeen percent applied the same description to an aide.

In asking another question, we told respondents that a source of news information may go unidentified for one or both of two reasons—the newsman feels a name won't mean anything to readers, and the news source wishes to avoid being identified by

TABLE 3

Percentages of Respondents Associating Veiled-Source Labels With Common Descriptive Phrases

| Descriptive Phrase | Label or Label Phrase | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Spokesman | Insider | Well-Placed Source | Aide | High-Ranking Official | Authority |
| Knows important people | 14% | 28% | 18% | 7% | 26% | 13% |
| Has little power or authority | 10% | 26% | 23% | 28% | 2% | 3% |
| Tends to be gossipy | 3% | 19% | 12% | 7% | 1% | 3% |
| Is Very honest | 8% | 7% | 9% | 5% | 6% | 9% |
| Has great expertise | 8% | 4% | 18% | 5% | 22% | 48% |
| Is simply a mouthpiece | 53% | 3% | 5% | 17% | 4% | 6% |
| Is devious | 1% | 3% | 6% | 2% | 6% | 3% |
| Tends to act only for selfish reasons | 1% | 4% | 3% | 0% | 9% | 3% |
| Is a hard worker | 1% | 3% | 4% | 25% | 3% | 7% |

Each respondent could choose as many descriptive phrases as he thought were relevant to a given label, so a label's percentages do not sum to 100%. All percentages are calculated on a base of 283, the number of respondents in the study.

name. We then asked which reason more often leads to name withholding.

By about a 4-1 margin (66% to 15%), people assigned the more common decision of lack of naming to the news source, not the reporter. Eleven percent insisted both are equally often involved. Thus over two-thirds of the sample apparently associated cloaking with strategic or personal reasons of news sources.

Furthermore, respondents had some doubts but few clear impressions as to whether veiled sources are basically honest. One question asked those who saw unnamed sources as less believable than named sources to tell why. Two choices were given—source knowledge and expertise, and source honesty and motivation.

By almost a 2-1 margin (45% to 26%), people saw lack of honesty and proper motivation as more basic reasons than lack of knowledge and expertise for doubting unnamed sources. This finding suggests some doubt about honesty and motivation of

cloaked sources. However, it must be interpreted in light of the rather common view, noted above, that many veiled sources are quite knowledgeable. In view of this, a source could be seen as fairly honest even if he appears to be less honest than knowledgeable.

Apparently, doubts about honesty seldom approached extreme cynicism. In the label-and-modifying-phrase matching exercise, very few people characterized spokesmen, aides, etc., as "very honest." However, as Table 3 shows, fewer still saw them as "devious."

These rather mixed and uncertain impressions about cloaked news sources led relatively few people to feel that, on balance, leaks are a bad thing.

We assumed that many people have reached no definite conclusions about the pros and cons of leaks. Thus, in asking a question on this, we sought to present arguments pro and con in a balanced but brief way so as to permit fairly well-informed responses:

> People in and out of journalism are debating whether leaks from news sources who refuse to be identified by name are good or bad.
>
> On the plus side, it is said, printing leaks from such sources often reveals events which people in a democratic society need to know about. Without "leaking," these events might go undetected.
>
> On the minus side, leaking is sometimes said to hamper grand juries, produce publicity which prevents a fair trial, and encourage self-serving acts by bureaucrats.
>
> Taking these and perhaps other arguments into account, would you say that publishing leaks is good or bad on balance? And how good or bad?
>
> Very good_____ Very bad_____
>
> Somewhat good_____ Somewhat bad_____
>
> Don't know, no opinion_____

Overall, 63% of those interviewed responded that leaks were good, 30% that they were bad. While question wording doubtless influenced responses in ways we could not fully assess, a 2-1 "vote of confidence" does suggest fairly widespread belief that, on balance, veiled attribution (or at least, leaks which involve cloaking) is a good thing.

In a related vein, we asked how well, on the whole, newspapers appear to do in providing information which people need in deciding whether to believe sources not quoted by name. The majority of all respondents (51%) said fairly well. Only 11% an-

swered very well, 24% not very well and 9% not well at all. In sum, the most common view was mildly favorable.

While perhaps reassuring to news people who fear criticism, this last finding also has its dark side. The newspaper-content study done as a preliminary to this one (see ANPA News Research Bulletin No. 3, May 1975) revealed very little information other than organizational affiliation which news consumers could use in assessing the credibility of veiled sources.

### A Field Experiment

The experiment on rating of named vs. veiled sources was designed to indicate whether cloaked attribution translates into doubt about a story viewed as a whole. The guarded answer here was that it doesn't.

Names and unnamed sources did not differ significantly on perceived accuracy. This held with all four stories and with both the Shaker Heights and two Ohio samples analyzed separately. Accuracy ratings on all stories were quite high, ranging from about 9.6 to 10.1 on a scale of 2 to 14.

Surprisingly, there was a slight but statistically reliable tendency for unnamed versions to be seen as more interesting than named. This difference was greater than one could expect by chance for all messages lumped together. It approached but did not reach statistical significance with three of the four messages viewed separately.

Apparently people sometimes translate the feeling that a cloaked source is "someone else's person," and that he or she has some reason for remaining secretive, into at least a mild aura of intrigue or conflict. This, in turn, may liven up a story. The finding wasn't marked or universal enough to be conclusive, but there's certainly enough indication to warrant further consideration.

However, as Table 4 shows, the tendency for unnamed sources to appear more interesting than named showed up only with messages placed second in the interview schedule (remember that each person received two). This held for all four message topics. Thus the finding seems unlikely to stem from unique properties of particular message combination.

We suspect that respondents saw unnamed sources as interesting primarily where prior exposure to named sources made them keenly aware of the named vs. unnamed distinction. It's interesting that no comparable order effect showed up in accuracy ratings.

In sum, then, heightened awareness of the named-unnamed distinction by the time one encountered his or her second message

TABLE 4

Mean Interest Ratings For Named And Unnamed Versions Of Four Experimental Articles*

| Position of Article in Questionnaire | Unnamed Versions (with veiled euphemisms substituted for names) | Named Versions (with named attribution) |
|---|---|---|
| First message received | 6.57 | 6.50 |
| Second message received | 7.98 | 6.53 |

These mean scores are computed for all four messages lumped together. The number of observations in a given cell varied from 135 to 148. An F-test revealed that the greater interest ratings assigned unnamed versions could have occurred by chance less than once in 100 times.

*These scores were computed on a scale ranging from 2-14. Each score was the sum of a respondent's separate ratings on 7-point semantic differential scales, **dull-exciting** and **interesting-uninteresting.**

appeared to make people aware of a leak's "intrigue or excitement" value without creating widespread skepticism as to accuracy.

## Individual Differences

Thus far, we have focused on reactions of *all* respondents, reagardless of education or political knowledge level. We now turn briefly to these variables.

People of higher social and economic status outdid lower-status persons in both appreciation of and skepticism about attribution practice (or at least, this was claimed—we must be somewhat wary of testimony about one's own behavior in a nebulous area like news story interpretation).

This general trend held up in that Shaker Heights residents outdid southeastern Ohioans, though not markedly. Also, highly educated people and those with substantial political knowledge in each community "outcriticized" people with less education and knowledge.

Some specifics:

- When asked how often they notice unnamed sources in reading a news story, about 52% of those with high school diplomas or less said very or fairly often. Comparable figures

were 65% for those with some education beyond high school but not a bachelor's degree, 81% for holders of at least a bachelor's degree. Similar differences were found when we looked at persons showing high, medium and low awareness of people in the news (see Table 5). However, the three communities did not differ significantly on this variable.

TABLE 5

**Percentage Of Respondents At Various Levels Of Education And Political Awareness Who Said They Notice Unnamed News Sources Very Often Or Fairly Often**

| | Level of Education or Political Awareness | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Factor Studied** | **Low** | **Medium** | **High** |
| Education Level* | 52% | 65% | 81% |
| Political Awareness** | 50% | 72% | 76% |

Respondents were asked how often they notice unnamed sources in the news: very often, fairly often, seldom or never. This table reports the percentage of respondents giving the first two of these answers.

*Percentages were computed on the basis of 95 low-educated respondents (high school diploma or less), 68 medium-educated persons (with some education beyond high school but without a bachelor's degree) and 98 high-educated individuals (holding at least a bachelor's degree). The overall differences among education levels could have occurred by chance less than once in 1,000 times.

**Percentages were computed on the basis of 96 low-aware respondents (who identified 3 or fewer of the 8 figures in the news listed in Table 2), 92 medium-aware persons (who identified 4 or 5 figures) and 78 high-aware individuals (who identified 6 to 8). The overall differences among awareness levels could have occurred by chance fewer than 5 times in 1,000.

- People in Shaker Heights along with the well-educated and the politically aware were likely to insist that they doubted veiled sources because these sources lacked knowledge and expertise as well as honesty and motivation. Fixing on both of these reasons for doubt with equal strength may suggest a critical stance.
- As shown in Table 6, about 31% of those not going beyond high school but only 10% of the college-degree holders attributed withholding of names to reporters rather than to news sources. These people apparently saw cloaking as a matter of honest news judgment rather than political,

bureaucratic or personal strategy and intrigue. In like fashion, Shaker Heights residents were less apt than southeastern Ohioans to attribute cloaking to newsmen. Also, politically aware persons opted for "news judgment" less often than did the less aware.

TABLE 6

**Percentage Of Respondents At Various Levels Of Education And Political Awareness Who Attributed Veiled Quotation More To Newsman Judgment Than To Source Needs For Privacy**

| | Level of Education or Political Awareness | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Factor Studied | Low | Medium | High |
| Education Level* | 31% | 14% | 10% |
| Political Awareness** | 25% | 17% | 10% |

*Percentages were computed on the basis of 94 low-educated respondents (high school diploma or less), 66 medium-educated (with some education beyond high school but without a bachelor's degree) and 73 high-educated (with at least a bachelor's degree). The overall difference among levels of education could have occurred by chance less than once in 100 times.

**Percentages were computed on the basis of 89 low-aware persons (who identified 3 or fewer of the 8 figures in the news listed in Table 2), 81 medium-aware persons (who identified 4 or 5 figures) and 73 high-aware individuals (who identified 6 or more). The overall difference here could occur by chance less than five times in 100.

Only respondents giving other than a don't know answer were included in the above percentage calculations.

- Forty-four percent of all college graduates felt the media don't do very well at all in providing background information about sources of leaks. Comparable figures were 39% for people with just some college, 25% for those with no post-high school education. However, this finding appears to be quite tentative, as it did not hold up with two other indices related to socioeconomic status (community of residence and political awareness).

To sum up, the well-informed, well-educated, cosmopolitan people in the sample were highly aware of factors which might lead one to doubt news leaks. But, at the same time, these rather elite news consumers had a greater appreciation of why, in a democratic society, leaks may be needed.

## Media Orientation

Recall that the indices of print and electronic media orientation used here reflect both time spent consuming news and importance attached to the various media as news sources.

A high print-media orientation correlated more strongly and consistently than did electronic-media orientation with several types of attentiveness and critical thought about news attribution. This is not surprising—depth reporting associated with veiled attribution is said to be rather rare in radio and TV news.

TABLE 7

**Percentage Of Respondents At Four Levels Of Print-Orientation Who Reported Various Ways Of Interpreting News Attribution**

| Specific Behavior Reported | Print-Orientation Score | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 0-1 | 2-3 | 4 |
| Noted veiled sources fairly often or very often* | 56% | 71% | 89% |
| Mean percentage of named sources noted by a given respondent** | 46% | 52% | 69% |
| Ascribed veiled attribution to source's need for secrecy more than to reporter's news judgment*** | 61% | 69% | 88% |
| Felt newspapers were doing not very well or not well at all in providing background information about veiled sources**** | 34% | 26% | 60% |

The number of respondents at each print-orientation level used in computing percentages varied somewhat from item to item as don't know and no-answer individuals were eliminated. However, base figures were roughly 142 for a print-orientation score of 0 or 1, 100 for a score of 2 or 3, and 36 for a score of 4.

*This overall difference among print-orientation levels could occur by chance less than once in 100 times.

**This overall difference among print-orientation levels could occur by chance less than once in 100 times. Here each respondent provided a percentage estimate. The table lists mean percentages.

***This overall difference could occur by chance less than twice in 100 times.

****This overall difference could occur by chance less than once in 100 times.

As Table 7 shows, people of high print-orientation tended to:

- Notice veiled news sources relatively often.
- Notice named sources often.
- Feel almost unanimously that the news source, not the reporters, generally takes the initiative in making veiled attributions.
- Criticize newspapers for providing inadequate background information about veiled sources.

### Watergate and Veiled Sources

Several questions about Watergate coverage provided support for the next three major findings:

- Watergate made many people more aware of cloaked attribution than they had been.
- People who saw a need to cover Watergate in detail tended to pay rather close attention to veiled sources—and to believe them.
- A fair number of people had doubts about the validity of veiled sources. And the overall tendency to define such doubts as stemming from a concern about honesty or motivation, not about knowledge and expertise, was particularly strong with avid Watergate news consumers. Further, these questions about honesty went along very often with a perception that sources are not identified largely because they refuse to be—they hold out for some reason.

Several questions provided evidence that Watergate has made people more aware of veiled sources—but not highly skeptical of them on the whole.

In one question we asked whether a respondent had become more or less aware of unnamed sources in the past year or two than prior to that time.* Sixty percent said more aware and 10% less, while 28% indicated no change.

Where a person answered "more aware," we asked why. Two-thirds of the comments were clearly linked to the overall Watergate affair.

In another part of the interview, we asked whether respondents felt the press had given Watergate too much coverage, about the right amount or too little. In all 55% said too much, 26% about the right amount, and only 7% too little. Those regarding Watergate coverage as too limited or about right in volume said they were

*These questions came fairly early in the interview schedule—prior to other items on Watergate. It seems unlikely, then, that prior items sensitized people to the scandal so as to inflate results here.

highly attentive to cloaking. Thirty-five percent of these relatively satisfied news customers, but only 18% of those complaining of an overdose, claimed to notice veiled sources very often.

This high attentiveness to cloaking didn't necessarily mean disbelief. In fact, 23% of those defining Watergate coverage as "about right" or "too little" but only 13 % of the overdose complainers said that, on the whole, unnamed sources are more believable than named. This difference was small enough that it could have occurred by chance seven times in 100. Still, it suggests that people who saw a need for heavy Watergate coverage were also inclined to credit Deep Throat and other veiled sources with a decent batting average.

## Political Stance

Persons interested in politics are likely to attend carefully to attribution practice. This is true regardless of political affiliation.

TABLE 8

Mean Percentage Of Named News Sources Noted By
Persons Of Varied Partisan Affiliations and Political Interest Levels

| Level of Interest in Politics | Partisan Affiliation or Leaning | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Republican | Democrat | Other* | Summed over all parties** |
| Very interested | 74.5% (15) | 57.6% (29) | 68.5% (14) | 68.9% |
| Somewhat interested | 46.9% (47) | 49.8% (68) | 51.5% (26) | 49.4% |
| Not interested at all | 48.5% (10) | 42.0% (10) | 30.5% (15) | 40.3% |

Numbers in parentheses indicate the number of respondents in the various cells. For example, there were 15 very interested Republicans and 68 somewhat interested Democrats.

*"Other" respondents included primarily those claiming to be independents (favoring no party at all) along with 18 respondents who associated themselves with the American Independent Party and other political parties, excluding the 2 major ones.

**Unweighted means were averaged to compute the means summed across all partisan affiliations. In the "very interested" row, for example, the 3 means were summed and the sum was divided by 3.

Analysis of variance revealed that the observed differences among levels of political interest could have occurred by chance less than 1 time in 100. Differences among partisan-affiliation groups were not statistically reliable.

Table 8 shows that, on the average, those very interested in politics reported noting 69% of all named news sources. Somewhat-interested persons said they saw 49% of such sources, not-interested individuals 40%.

TABLE 9

Frequency With Which Respondents At Various Levels Of Political Interest Report Noticing Veiled Sources

| Frequency of noting veiled sources | Level of Political Interest | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Very Interested | Somewhat Interested | Not Interested At All |
| Never | 0% | 3% | 11% |
| Seldom | 17% | 32% | 49% |
| Fairly often | 46% | 44% | 30% |
| Very often | 37% | 21% | 11% |
| | 100% | 100% | 100% |
| | (59 respondents) | (146 respondents) | (37 respondents) |

The overall difference among political interest levels could have occurred by chance less than 1 time in 100.

Turning veiled sources in Table 9, 83% of all very-interested persons said they noted veiled sources very often or fairly often. That compared with 65% for somewhat-interested folks, only 41% for the not-interested.

Further, highly interested persons were somewhat more critical than others of background information provided about veiled sources. A substantial 19% of the highly interested characterized media performance as not good at all. Only 6% of the somewhat-interested and 8% of the not-interested made similar assessments.

Democrats were more apt than Republicans to believe veiled sources and to see a genuine need for them. However, the two parties did not differ in overall attentiveness to attribution.

A substantial 22% of all Democrats, but only 11% of Republicans, saw unnamed sources as more believable on the whole than named. This squares with the finding, noted earlier, that people who saw a strong need for intensive Watergate coverage were quite inclined to believe veiled sources.

In assessing leaks as a whole, 74% of all Democrats and 62% of others saw them as good on balance. While not large, this difference could have occurred by chance fewer than five times in 100.

## References


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[3]Seymour Hersh, "But Don't Tell Anyone I Told You," *New Republic* 157:13-14, December 9, 1967.

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[6]Polls by the Louis Harris organization have been particularly revealing here.

[7]Alex Edelstein, "Media Credibility and the Believability of Watergate," American Newspaper Publishers Association News Research Bulletin, January 10, 1974.

[8]Charles E. Swanson, "What They Read in 130 Daily Newspapers," *Journalism Quarterly* 34:317-322, Summer 1955. Also see Wilbur Schramm and David M. White, "Age, Education and Economic Status as Factors in Newspaper Reading," pp. 438-50 in Wilbur Schramm (ed.), *Mass Communications* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1960).

[9]Guido H. Stempel, "Effects on Performance of a Cross-Media Monopoly," *Journalism Monographs* 29 (June 1973).

[10]In all, there were 125 completed interviews in Shaker Heights, 112 in Zanesville, and 46 in Athens. Response rates were 81% in Athens, 70% in Zanesville, and 79% in Shaker Heights. Interviewers went to a next-door neighbor when, after three callbacks, an original respondent could not be contacted.

[11]Percy H. Tannenbaum and Jack M. McLeod, "Public Images of Mass Media Institutions," *Paul J. Deutschmann Memorial Papers in Mass Communication Research*, (Cincinnati, Ohio: Scripps-Howard Research, 1963), pp. 51-60. Also see Hugh M. Culbertson, "Words vs. Pictures: Perceived Impact and Connotative Meaning," *Journalism Quarterly* 51:226-37, Summer 1974.

[12]Burns W. Roper, *A Ten-Year View of Public Attitudes Toward Television and Other Mass Media, 1959-1968* (New York: Television Information Office, 1969).